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Full Circle: The Reappearance of Privilege and Responsibility in American Higher Education

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Anyone familiar with current initiatives in higher education is well aware of the increasing emphasis on public service as a component of an undergraduate degree, and the rhetoric of contemporary dialogues might well lead one to believe that public service is an entirely new concept in American higher education. This essay offers a different view. Far from being new, public service in one form or another was a significant element of the college curriculum from the seventeenth century until the Civil War. The reappearance of this notion, I believe, signals a rebirth, but at the same time marks a departure from the trends that developed after 1865. At the same time, the field considered here is somewhat circumscribed. This essay is concerned with American higher education, but not with all of it. There is no mention of community colleges, an omission some may find serious, even inexcusable, in any discussion of the role of service in higher education. Likewise there is scant attention paid to the denominational colleges and universities founded between the 1820s and 1910s, which served the needs of an immigrant population and which also had significant service functions. In defense of these exclusions, I can say only that they occupy an interesting and important place in American higher education's past, but they are not central to the argument presented here.

It will come as no surprise to students of the history of American higher education to be told its past is a checkerboard not only of accomplishment but of discontinuity and discord. Uniformity of opinion or purpose, far from the expectation, would be a source of astonishment.

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Any summary of the topic must begin with the American liberal arts college, the fortuitous product of an English beginning, which grew according to its own internal dynamic after the separation of the colonies from the mother country. When the General Court of Massachusetts in 1636 authorized a grant of four hundred pounds towards the creation of a college, they were thinking in terms of the Oxbridge model and expected it to be merely the first of a number of such foundations which would be grouped physically and spiritually around one another. Of course, the combined effects of physical, and later political and cultural, separation led to a very different result, with Harvard College, as it became known in honor of the man who donated his library to the institution, pursuing an independent line of development. Harvard became the model for the liberal arts colleges, which constituted the vast majority of all collegiate foundations before 1865.

While its curriculum had advanced beyond the old *trivium* and *quadrivium*, both were still recognizably present in the academic program presented to students in the period from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. The grammar, rhetoric and logic of the first two years' study in the medieval university had become training in Greek and Latin, not markedly different from their *trivial*, scholastic predecessors, especially when one considers the parts of Renaissance philosophy that crept into the classroom. The last two years were given over to the study of rhetoric, mathematics, and natural philosophy, with here and there, depending on the college and the expertise of particular professors, instruction in modern languages (chiefly French and German).

The education thus dispensed was heavily moral and linguistic, while training in the sciences was notably absent, and the chief and announced aim of such a program of instruction was to produce a Christian gentleman, an emphasis that became more evident as the student progressed through school. The clergy—and clergy of various stripes dominated most though not all liberal arts colleges—played a central role in the development of the curriculum and gave a specific direction and tone to all instruction. Most of these institutions had as one, though not their sole, purpose the training of a learned clergy. Their founders and benefactors also determined the schools should produce men (and only very seldom women) who preserved and promoted a distinctively Christian society. That emphasis received its finest statement in the course in moral philosophy required of

all students in the senior year, which would almost invariably be taught by the college president, who would almost invariably be a clergyman. There the students learned it was the Christian gentleman's responsibility actively to do social good, particularly by maintaining Christian civilization, especially when threatened by a spirit of French license. Yale, Brown, Trinity, and Wesleyan all had such courses as graduation requirements, and their expressed purpose, as the historian Isaac Sharples noted, was "...to create that product most needed in America, the public-spirited scholar, the broad-minded and welcome leader of democracy." In every institution, the thrust in such courses was on the Christian's civic duty to serve the public good and maintain the stability of society. Through civic activity, charitable work and exemplary behavior, as student and later as citizen, the Christian gentleman was to serve as one of the props of society.

Of course, a college education was generally the avenue to prosperity as well, but neither students nor professors saw it as the means to the accumulation of great wealth. Rather, financial comfort and status were its rewards, especially the level accorded to one who found his livelihood in the learned professions, the clergy, law and medicine.

The other side of the coin of responsibility was privilege: education provided advantages to the recipient, again not only in the financial sense, but in the intellectual serenity and breadth of mind and character that it inculcated in those so trained. Indeed, in the pre-Civil War era, education was a privilege open to only a few. With no more than two hundred institutions, many of which survive only in scanty and uninformative collections of records, it is a safe assumption that there were no more than ten thousand students in American higher education, most of those in a small number of colleges which dominated the landscape. Yale and the University of Virginia between them enrolled more than ten percent of all college students in the United States. The number is all the more remarkable when one realizes that the population of the country already stood at more than 31,000,000.

The place of the liberal arts college changed dramatically after the Civil War, as did the nation as a whole. After the trauma of war and Reconstruction, the reunited republic experienced economic growth and industrialization on an unparalleled scale. Accompanying industrialization were changes of profound significance in both the composition and distribution of population. The movement from field to factory was by no

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means complete by 1900, but dramatic alterations in population concentration were already apparent. Urban centers adjacent to the new, developing transportation networks of the Midwest and the Great Lakes sprang up, and new urban giants such as Chicago and Cleveland displaced the older manufacturing centers of the Northeast. Increasing numbers of foreign-born people constituted another new element in industrial America. Though the United States had always been a land of immigrants, the newcomers of the post-Civil War era differed from their predecessors in both kind and extent. Until the 1880s, Northern Europeans, chiefly Germans and Irish, constituted the bulk of the new arrivals. By 1890, Southern and Eastern Europeans, Poles, Italians, Greeks and Russians, outnumbered the more traditional groups. While they helped fuel the industrial expansion of the late nineteenth century, they also brought with them foreign customs and ideas, many of the latter economic and social doctrines disquieting to the older, more settled segments of American society.

The response of American higher education to manifold new circumstances was by no means uniform or even coherent, as public and private segments of society reacted differently. States founded or reawakened higher education systems, while many private individuals endowed a new kind of collegiate, more properly university, foundation. In this new environment, many of the liberal arts colleges entered a period of relative stagnation while others received a spur to action from the new colleges and universities.

The large state university constitutes a significant response to the new industrial order. While those who wrote the founding legislation for these institutions would most likely not comprehend in detail what has become the current scope and scale of their creations, it is unlikely that they would be dissatisfied with their evolutions, and most would, I think, find the modern “flagship research university” in keeping with their original legislative intent. While some of these institutions were born before the Civil War, notably the Universities of Virginia and Missouri, and while others, most notably the University of Michigan, were created in the spirit of the old liberal arts college—to produce students with well trained minds and charitable, liberal spirits—most date from the post-war era and reflect the dominant American themes of individual improvement and economic progress. Public higher education in the United States, from its inception, was not only an alternative to the narrow curriculum of the entrenched liberal arts college

but a recrudescence of the spirit of *laissez-faire* so prevalent in the post-Civil War United States. Proponents saw the state university as the means to promote the economic advancement of the individual and the economic welfare of the nation as a whole.

As early as the late eighteenth century, many states tried to establish schools, e.g., Jefferson's University of Virginia, or to expropriate existing ones, New Hampshire's attempt to gain control of Dartmouth being the most explicit example of the latter tactic. In both instances, the exponents advocated a more modern version of liberal education, freed from the narrow, sectarian boundaries of more traditional institutions. However, it awaited the end of the nineteenth century before the state university began significant development. Two pieces of federal legislation are particularly important in the history of public higher education in this country: the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Morrill Act of 1862, whose scope was expanded by an additional act in 1890. The first required the states carved from the territory included in the ordinance's domain to set aside tracts of land for state universities. The second extended the provision of land grants for state higher education to the older states in the Union. The newer state universities resembled Jefferson's University of Virginia in many respects, but the intellectual foundation on which they rested differed in fundamental ways. First, its curriculum was more "democratic," with no branch of knowledge, particularly the classical curriculum, enjoying a special place. Second, the state university emphasized practical subjects, especially those with an observable economic return for the individual student. Additionally, the new state universities were created specifically to drive the state's economic engine, particularly if they were land grant institutions. These latter offered services to farmers and later to homemakers and increasingly featured programs that aided agriculture, and in some cases industry.

The era that witnessed the birth of the state university also saw the coming of a new kind of private institution of higher education, the large, private, research-oriented schools. Although many of them could trace their origins to the traditional liberal arts college, they ultimately became much different sorts of institutions. Most were founded by magnates, who almost always were men who lacked much in the way of formal education. Moreover, they took their inspirations from the American infatuation with the German universities, which resulted from the experience of many young

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students who made their ways to Berlin, Göttingen, Jena, and other German universities after 1865. Less influential but worthy of mention was Abraham Flexner's study of European and American universities, and its advocacy of the German model—with its certainty in the rational organization of knowledge and the seminar method—as the proper one for a nation which aspired to scientific, industrial, economic, and intellectual modernity. The first of these was endowed by the financier Johns Hopkins in 1876, who gave the first president of his namesake university, Danial Coit Gilman, the opportunity to create an institution according to his own dictates. The result was a school which still taught classical subject matter but whose distinguishing characteristic was a modern curriculum stressing science and research. The model served as a basis, though in less stark form, for Cornell (1868), Stanford (1891) and many others. As with Johns Hopkins, both Cornell and Stanford were founded by men who had made fortunes in industries such as telegraphy and railroads.

The most important of all institutions in this group was and remains the University of Chicago. Unlike the others, it began life not on the research university model but as a more traditional institution, a liberal arts college founded by John D. Rockefeller to train ministers for the Baptist faith. Though it failed in its original intent and was recreated on the German model, it reflected Rockefeller's strong religious convictions, not expected in a Robber Baron, and retained much of its original emphasis for many years. Rockefeller made it a point to hire Baptists, particularly Baptist ministers, as faculty members whenever possible, and he insisted thorough searches be made for such men when positions were filled. To underscore the Baptist nature of the institution, Rockefeller specified in the University's original charter that only Baptists would be allowed to serve as trustees. Nor was the ethic of social responsibility, linked to the privilege of higher education, lost in the new university. Many of the new faculty were dedicated to the principles and activities of such a life. A good example at Chicago was Albion Small, the first head of the nation's first department of sociology. A Baptist minister by training, Small was active in the YMCA and social settlement work in Chicago, though he discouraged the social work tradition within the practice of academic sociology. Robert Park, his successor, carried on an emphasis on personal social work though he, likewise, was less concerned with the meliorative aspects of the discipline than with the quantitative emphasis then emerging in sociology. However,

Chicago was unusual if not unique in retaining its religious and social service emphasis. Most of the newer private universities stressed a close connection to private industry and a propensity for research that resulted in direct economic benefit.

The new private research universities had a significant, even a transforming effect on the older liberal arts colleges. To both administrators and alumni, it was apparent that the future lay in the new university form of organization, the modern, science-based curriculum, and basic research. In 1869 Charles William Eliot, the new president of Harvard, advocated curricular modernization, openly calling for the institution of an elective system similar to the University of Virginia's. Three years later, Harvard became in fact, if not name, a university when it established a "graduate department." Yale changed its name and its form of organization when it became Yale University in 1887, and in 1896 the College of New Jersey took the name of the town in which it was located and became Princeton University. The new names reflected profound transfigurations occurring in these institutions.

A somewhat parallel development occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the creation of new denominational institutions, founded chiefly to serve the children of immigrant populations. Most, but by no means all of these were Roman Catholic colleges and universities, often in core cities. Frequently, they were multi-purpose, with highly developed professional schools, particularly law and medicine, existing side-by-side with programs to allow newly arrived people to gain literacy in English.

The final piece in this post-Civil War mosaic of higher education was the normal school. As with the state university, there were normal schools—at least they were "on the books" as a result of the passage of enabling legislation in at least a dozen states before the Civil War—but it was not until the late nineteenth century that they appeared as concrete entities. Most preparation of teachers before the 1890s was carried on in short "institutes" of a few weeks' duration at established colleges or universities, for enrollment in which there were no admissions requirements. In other instances, training occurred in a secondary school, with admission open to those who had a primary education. While older private and public institutions also became interested in teacher preparation after 1870—the University of Michigan, the University of Iowa, the University of Missouri,

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and Columbia University (formerly King's College, a liberal arts institution)—all created departments of education or other free standing units whose purpose was to train teachers, states were more aggressive in founding newer normal schools. By 1875 their numbers had grown to more than 125, and by the turn of the century, there were more than 300. In 1900 enrollment in normal schools exceeded 65,000. In terms of curricular philosophy and the types of education they offered, the normal schools were a different breed from any of their predecessors, and the curriculum for teacher preparation was, at best, variable. In some cases, Columbia University's Teachers College being the best example, students were required to take a blend of courses from the traditional liberal disciplines buttressed by work in pedagogy. The emphasis was on a balanced education, and, in modern terms, the new teacher emerged with something approximating a disciplinary major. However, in many institutions, most notably state normal schools which accepted students after a primary education, courses in pedagogy and basic skills, including instruction in reading and penmanship, constituted most of the student's work. None of the formal training in subject matter that characterized degree work in the older or newer colleges and universities was present here.

The forces that actuated the normal school movement also differed from those evident in the foundation of older institutions. The political and philosophical justification for their creation rested on a dual underpinning: teachers were needed to educate the nation, particularly those recently arrived in the nation, for citizenship, and an educated population was necessary to the economic well-being of the individual, the several states, and the country as a whole. Both arguments were compelling, and most states authorized normal schools in several of their regions; the notion of a normal school in each corner of the state gained credence in many places. As with the state universities, the leading force behind their creation was economic and political, which fit well with the ethos of a nation just entering the throes of the modern world. There was, as well, one very significant unintended consequence. The normal school movement brought large numbers of women into higher education for the first time, a group whose outlook and experience differed in many respects from those of their male colleagues. That story is an interesting and portentous one, and unfortunately outside the scope of this piece.

This brief survey will, I hope, indicate that among the variety of

institutions of higher education in the United States, the notions of privilege and a linked social responsibility were significant only in the old liberal arts colleges. This is not to say these ideas were not present elsewhere, but nowhere did they hold sway with such force as they did in older, more traditional institutions, and these ideas never gained much of a foothold at the newer ones. Thus the reappearance of the ideas of privilege and responsibility at this time allow us to make some interesting comparisons and to speculate on the future of the programs that advance these ideas. I have chosen as the modern text for examination the current Campus Compact, not only because it is the largest of these movements but because it is the one with which I am most familiar

The Campus Compact was founded in 1985 by a group of college and university presidents, only a few more than a literal handful, concerned with providing what they termed “service opportunities” which would allow students to employ their academic training in a setting where they might perform socially useful work and gain practical experience. Since its foundation, the Compact has remained committed to its initial goals and has remained as well an organization which functions ultimately at the presidential level—no campus can join without a clear signal of support from its president, and in many institutions the officer responsible for the compact’s day-to-day operations reports directly to the provost or, in rare instances, to the president. Bolstered by aggressive leadership and by the National and Community Service Act of 1990, its growth in slightly more than ten years has been striking. *[Editor’s note: The figures presented in this paragraph reflect the realities of 1995, when this essay was accepted for publication in the NCHC’s former refereed publication, Forum for Honors. See the introduction to this issue of JNCHC.]* From its initial seven founding presidents, it has grown to more than 350 members nation-wide, functioning as both a clearinghouse for information on educational opportunities and a reservoir of technical expertise. In about a dozen states, including my own state of Washington, all the four-year public and private institutions are now members, and in Washington as well as others of the dozen states noted above, many of the state’s community colleges have also joined. There is no state without at least one member. It is noteworthy, I believe, that one of the founding members, and the one that serves as the central clearinghouse, is Brown University, one of the transformed liberal arts colleges described earlier in this paper.

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Perhaps the most innovative in providing outlets for social service work has been Amherst, an unregenerate liberal arts college!

The literature of the Washington State Campus Compact, almost identical to that of the national body, promotes the notion that "...service is an integral part of preparing college students for their roles as civic leaders." Additionally, it should "...place civic education, civic participation, and social responsibility squarely within the academic mission of higher education." Further, the Compact's central missions "...are to model, through action and activity, a commitment to the ethic of service..." The key to service is something called "service learning," which the literature describes as:

A method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community; [and] that is integrated into the student's academic curriculum...

It is evident that such service carries an award of academic credit, and as the old adage stipulates, students are encouraged to do well by doing good.

Through the Compact, students have embarked on a number of projects that both accomplish socially useful ends and provide them with a good deal of real life experience, all the while making progress toward their degrees. On my own campus, participants in the program have raised funds for a runaway youth shelter, worked with residents in homes for the elderly and volunteered in the local hospital. The list could go on, but there is no need to multiply examples. There is no reason to believe that the experience of Western Washington students is unique in the state or nation.

If one compares the economic aspects of the modern incarnation of the instinct to service with what has been presented here as its nineteenth-century counterpart, some interesting points emerge. Both have an important economic component. Entrance into the professions or politics was common for the nineteenth-century student, while the modern student frequently goes on to a career in social work or a similar field. Some Compact students from our campus program have entered the ministry. The connection between education and livelihood is more direct and more

obvious now, though the standard to which the student may aspire is comparatively less comfortable than in the nineteenth century. At the same time, the notion of education as privilege is more and more difficult to support. In a nation where fully half of all high school graduates go on to some form of post-secondary training, and where a college degree is mandatory for many types of employment, attendance scarcely constitutes a privilege. Entrance into a highly competitive institution or an Honors Program may be, but mere attendance is not. The appeal now is to what one “owes” in a loosely defined social sense rather than what one is obligated to do on moral grounds.

One significant difference between the old and new remains to be discussed. In the traditional liberal arts college, enrollment was exclusively male, while females constitute a majority of students in higher education today. Moreover, at least on my own campus and in service learning projects, females constitute the vast majority of students. Women outnumber men by more than two to one in Western’s Campus Compact activities. It is true that, as an institution, we have more females than males—about 55% of Western Washington’s enrollment is female—but the disparity between men and women in service learning is significantly larger. At least at Western Washington, women tend to be represented in larger numbers in the sorts of programs where service learning is more clearly an adjunct to the major, e.g. the so-called helping professions, education, and psychology, but we have no hard statistics and no survey results to indicate any underlying reasons for the choice of the service learning options. While I have asked programs on other campuses, it appears that their data are no harder than our own, but anecdotal evidence from friends and colleagues at other institutions indicates at least some agreement with our experience at Western. I think this point bears further inquiry by those capable of undertaking it.

This brief survey has, I hope, brought a few leading ideas to the surface. First, the notion that higher education is a privilege that confers on the recipient a consequent responsibility is an old one, coeval in the American setting with the very foundation of higher education. Indeed, it was one leading, if not the leading, idea in the liberal arts college tradition. Of course, coterminous with this idea were also concepts of paternalism and social control that are uncongenial in modern American universities and colleges. That aside, it is equally clear, I think, that it was with the appearance of the

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modern educational establishment, in particular the public and private research institutions and the normal schools, that the importance of the notion of service declined. In fine, we may view the rise and cultivation of the modern individualist ethos of the twentieth century as the foil to the ethic of service. If this ethic is reappearing, if the Campus Compact is the recrudescence of the service ethic, it also bears many of the hallmarks of this modern ethos. The Compact is specifically vocational in its thrust—one is “called” to do well by doing good. Service may never have been selfless, but it is certainly no more so now than formerly. If this be the case, let us at least work the reappearance for what it is worth.

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